How Hamas' ideology of martyrdom led to the sacrifice of an entire population

Children talk with masked members of Hamas's military wing during a march through the streets in the central Gaza Strip, May 28, 2021. (AP Photo/ Adel Hana)

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At 6:30 a.m. on Saturday, October 7, 2023 Hamas launched an unprovoked surprise attack on Israel. Terrorists infiltrated Israel using rockets, paragliders, boats, motorcycles, and other vehicles with a single objective: to murder and kidnap Israelis. This objective resulted in the death of over 1,300 Israelis while close to 12,000 were wounded and at least 240 Israeli and Foreign civilians were taken hostage. Atrocities, cruelty and barbarism on October 7 included, among others, mass killing, mutilations, dismemberment of bodies and rape.

Following these atrocities, the International Criminal Court (ICC) decided on Monday, May 20, 2024 to apply for arrest warrants against Yahya Sinwar, Head of the Islamic Resistance Movement in the Gaza Strip; Mohammed Diab Ibrahim AL-Masri, more commonly known as Deif, Commander-in-Chief of the military wing of Hamas, known as the Al-Qassam Brigades and Ismail Haniyeh, Head of Hamas Political Bureau.

The request for arrest warrants was also issued against the Israeli Prime Minister and Minister of Defense, Yoav Gallant. Whatever one may think of the current far-right government of Benyamin Netanyahu and its poor declarations or choices, it is scandalous to put it on the same level as leaders who adhere to a charter (Covenant of the Islamic Resistance Movement of 1988) that states in article 8 that "Jihad is its path and death for the

sake of Allah is the loftiest of its wishes."

From its origin in 1987, Hamas' perspective on territory has been indeed shaped by jihad, as they believe that peace in Palestine can only be achieved under Islam and Sharia law. This vision necessitates the acceptance of Islam as the supreme religion and law. Under Hamas, the fighters of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict have embraced a narrative of jihad against Israel, marking a significant shift from the secular identity of the early *fedayeen* to a more religiously defined role as a *shahid* or martyr. Since the beginning of the Second Intifada, Hamas's integration of civilian and military roles stems from its ideology that considers every Palestinian a part of the martyrdom in the path to jihad against Israel.

Since the attack carried out by Hamas against Israel in October, the terrorist group has used the term "martyrs" to describe the dead on the Palestinian side. In its broad and dual conception, the idea of martyrdom means "he who is killed fighting against disbelievers and for no other reason than that" but also the one whose sacrifice is offered to the entire community. If there is no doubt about the desire of the terrorists who crossed the Israeli border on October 7 to become martyrs, we nevertheless wonder whether the concept of martyrdom is really supported by all Palestinians. And in this case, isn't Hamas' ideology of martyrdom that led to a war that is now sacrificing an entire population in Gaza?

Fundings behind the construction of tunnels and military arsenal in Gaza

"Money is the sinews of war" and money from international aid began to flow in Gaza, notably since Israel imposed, with Egypt, the blockade in 2007 following Hamas takeover of the Gaza Strip. Since 2007, Doha has sent billions of dollars in humanitarian aid to the Palestinians over the years to ease the impact of the blockade. More generally, it is estimate that since 2014 between 1,000 and 2,600 million dollars have been received by Hamas to contribute to the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip. However, the reality is that some of this international aid money has always ended up in the hands of Hamas' military wing (under the command of Yahya Sinwar and Mohammed Diab Ibrahim AL-Masri) which Fatah, the rival party to Hamas that runs the Palestinian Authority (PA), also accused.

The embezzled international money has been in part used to build tunnels. The constructio of combat tunnels began in the 2000s, already before Israel withdrew from the Gaza Strip in 2005. These constructions accelerated following Hamas's election in Gaza in 2006 and the subsequent blockade imposed by Israel and Egypt on the Gaza Strip starting in 2007. Since the 2014 "Operation Protective Edge", there has been a notable shift in Hamas' budget allocation. Indeed Hamas' civilian affairs budget has seen a decrease, while its military budget has increased significantly. In 2014, Hamas allocated 15% of its annual budget to military purposes against 55%in 2016. It is estimated that Hamas has invested over $150 million in constructing tunnels for military use.

In addition to the diverted financial support coming from many Western countries, the two main financial supporters of Hamas are Qatar on the one hand but also Iran on the other. In

2012, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al Thani, then Emir of Qatar, promised multimillion-dollar aid then in 1016, his brother the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, announced that his country would allocate 113 million Qatari riyals (approximately $30 million) to "alleviate the suffering of the brothers in the Gaza Strip and the serious difficulties financial problems they face (...) because of the unjust siege imposed on them by the Israeli occupation."

On the other hand, since the 1990s, Iran has significantly increased its support for Hamas and other groups in Gaza. According to several media outlets, Iran allegedly paid more than 200 million euros to Hamas since 2014. Iran's financing of Hamas' military arsenal is apparently less hidden than Qatar's financial aid. In March 2022, in an interview with Al-Jazeera, Ismail Haniyeh, Head of Hamas Political Bureau, mentioned that while various countries contribute financially to the group, Iran is their largest benefactor. Haniyeh disclosed that the Islamic Republic provided $70 million to Hamas to aid in the development of missiles and defense systems.

Furthermore, let us emphasize here that Hamas has repeatedly used the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) facilities for its military activities. UNRWA is headquartered in Gaza and Amman in Jordan and receives contributions from United Nations member states, including regional governments and the European Union, making up over 89% of the agency's funding. Additionally, it receives financial support from the regular UN budget and other UN bodies. The agency was, however, the subject of severe criticism regarding its credibility when on January 26, 2024, the United States announced that it would "temporarily suspend" all future funding to UNRWA after allegations that 12 of the agency's employees, of the 13,000 active in the Gaza Strip, were involved in the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7.

Gazan peace activist Ahmed Fouad Alkhatib declared in April 2024 that from the mid-1990s through the early 2000s, Hamas operated behind the scenes to infuse the Palestinian cause with Islamic principles, weaken the PA, and derail the peace process. He also wrote on Social Media : "If you care about Palestinians, demand that Hamas end the war it started by releasing the hostages and negotiating for a ceasefire." Indeed, Hamas' ideology of martyrdom led to the sacrifice of an entire population but let us not forget that Hamas' ideology is comparable to that of the Islamic Republic in Iran: behind the savagery of its leaders there is also a part of its population which aspires to security and peace.

Israel's lost bet on economic development in Gaza

One of the long-term consequences of the war in Gaza is inevitably economic. According to a report from the UNCTAD on the social and economic deterioration in Gaza since the beginning of the military operation after 7 October 2023, the destruction will take tens of billions of dollars and decades to reverse. But as some economic experts admit, the underdevelopment of the territory in Gaza even before the war was less linked to the Israeli blockade than to the diversion of international aid practiced by Hamas. The question that

now arises is : what will happen the “day after”?

On the economic level Israel is also often accused of keeping through its “occupation” the Palestinian economy in a vicious circle with harmful consequences in terms of activity, employment and development. What is often highlighted is the high unemployment rate in Gaza. However, what is less publicized is the existence of an economical cooperation between Israel and the Palestinian Authority through the Israeli-Palestinian Joint Economic Committee established under the Oslo Accords. These Israeli-Palestinian economic peace efforts aim to foster joint economic projects between Israelis and Palestinians, serving as a pathway to achieving peace between the two groups – even in Gaza.

In 2019, Israel allowed 5,000 Palestinians from the enclave to enter for work in Israeli territory. Toward the end of Netanyahu’s fifth government in 2021, about 2,000 to 3,000 work permits were issued to Gazans. This number even saw a significant rise to 10,000 during the Bennett-Lapid government in 2021-2022. Prior to 2007, when Hamas took over Gaza through an offensive carried out in June, some 120,000 Palestinian workers from Gaza were employed in Israel.

On the other hand, while on a military and political level, Hamas has always been considered by the various governments led by Benjamin Netanyahu a terrorist organization, on an economic level Hamas was elevated to an entity with which Israel engaged in indirect negotiations through Egypt. As mentioned before, in 2012, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al Thani, then Emir of Qatar, promised multimillion-dollar aid, which was ultimately approved by Israel. It is well known that this money was transferred from Doha to Israel and has long entered Gaza in briefcases filled with banknotes carried by Qatari envoys through the Erez crossing in the north of the Gaza Strip.

Thus, Hamas has been subject to sanctions for decades, however was also permitted to receive financial support from abroad. The funds, transferred in coordination with the United States and Israel, paid monthly, helped pay part of the salaries of nearly 50,000 Gazan officials, buy fuel to power the strip’s electrical grid and help the poorest families, who received a monthly check of 100 dollars. Israel thought that if economic opportunities were provided, the situation in Gaza would improve and the tensions decrease, but it turned out to be a mistake.

Israel thought it could use a form of economic diplomacy to engage in indirect negotiations with Hamas but as long as Hamas resorts to the ideology of martyrdom to lead its fight against Israel, the Jewish State will find itself in an imbalance facing an adversary who gives no value to life and therefore also *de facto* to morality or to the rules of war. For this reason the request for arrest warrants against Yahya Sinwar, Deif and Ismail Haniyeh from the ICC is profoundly just and justified.

So what about the “day after” ? When Israel unilaterally withdrew from Gaza in 2005, Israel’ hope was to see a mini Singapore flourish in the Middle East. Instead, it is a mini Islamic

State that emerged. Since the Interim Agreement on the West Bank and Gaza Strip (also known as Oslo II) in 1995, the West Bank has been divided into three administrative zones: Zones A, B and C. Area A covers 20% and includes the seven major Palestinian cities in the West Bank. It is the responsibility of the PA to provide security and administration to the 55% of Palestinian population living there. As the idea of the two State solution is reactualzed, the "day after" could give an opportunity to create a new "area A" in Gaza and thus finally show the international community that the Palestinian struggle does not mean, as we see it with Hamas, the destruction of Israel.

I would like to emphasize again that the goal of my articles isn't to minimize the impacts and reality of the war. Furthermore, my writing does not diminish my deep sorrow for the innocent women and children who have lost their lives, victims of a war initiated by the Islamist terrorist organization, who nonetheless refuses to accept responsibility for it. My only purpose is to highlight Hamas' responsibility for the humanitarian crisis and tragedy that is currently taking place under our eyes in Gaza.